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Coleman, Culture, and Reading Comprehension Tests
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On October 5 and 6, Johns Hopkins University commemorated James Coleman's Equality of Educational Opportunity Report *(1966) with scholars and policymakers who have studied and addressed America's persistent achievement gaps. The speakers included United States Secretary of Education John King and Andreas Schleicher, Director for Education and Skills, OECD; their remarks may be found here. Hansel's piece is offered in light of Coleman's groundbreaking work.*

Imagine that scientists discover a cure for cancer. The treatment regimen is complex, but doable: For several years, teams of health care professionals must coordinate their efforts and stick to the long-term plan, even as they respond to differences in patients' short-term needs. Outcomes are not identical, because of people's underlying health differences, but virtually everyone who gets the full treatment goes on to live a longer, more enjoyable life. There's just one catch: Hospitals are rated on short-term outcomes, so resources are not allocated to the multi-year planning needed to accomplish outstanding long-term results.

This isn't just a thought exercise. It's a pretty accurate summary of the state of affairs with reading comprehension.

Cognitive scientists and reading researchers have found—quite definitively—that (1) basic skills plus a massive foundation of knowledge drive reading comprehension, and (2) most children who struggle to become strong readers have mastered the skills but not yet amassed sufficient knowledge.[i]

Here's how Harvard professor Nonie K. Lesaux sums up the issue:

> Skills-based competencies are those that allow students to master the mechanics of reading. They are highly susceptible to instruction, are learned in the primary grades by the average student, and for the great majority of students are not a lasting source of difficulty.... Knowledge-based competencies, by contrast, must be developed over many years and are key sources of lasting individual differences in reading ability.[ii]

Nell K. Duke, of the University of Michigan, and Meghan Block, of Central Michigan University, have been even more direct:

> Perhaps the greatest obstacle to improving primary-grade reading is a short-term orientation toward instruction and instructional reform. When the aim is to show reading improvements in a short period of time, spending large amounts of time on word-reading skill and its foundations, and relatively little on comprehension, vocabulary, and conceptual and content knowledge, makes sense.... Yet the long-term consequences of failing to attend to these areas cannot be overstated.[iii]

A couple of examples will make the problem clear enough. Let's start with the "Emancipation Proclamation." While most third-graders would be able to sound out the phrase, precious few would understand its meaning or historical significance. Likewise, most third-graders could easily "read" the sentence, "I have a dream," but only the luckiest few would grasp the beauty and urgency of those words. This is the heart of reading comprehension. The skills are relatively easy to master; the knowledge base that unlocks meaning—to discern, for instance, between an ordinary dream and a dream that inspires millions—takes years to cultivate.

Because the foundation of academic knowledge that children need to become great readers is broad and diverse, schools need a specific, grade-by-grade plan for imparting that knowledge across all subject areas. The less the sum of academic knowledge children learn outside of school, the more effective schools must be—and the more willing policymakers and taxpayers must be to provide longer school years, more field trips, and more summer enrichment, if they are to strive toward equity.

High-performing countries like Finland, Japan, and Singapore have such a plan; they call it a core curriculum. In the U.S., under various guises such as individualization, student engagement, and local control, most states and districts resist such coordination. Our middling-to-poor results on international assessments speak for themselves.

Damn the Tests or Equalize Opportunity?

If we had listened to James S. Coleman, if we had understood the educational enterprise as he did, we might still lead the world in education. Coleman saw that developing a broad base of academic knowledge should be a primary goal of schooling, so he tested for it:

> Tests similar to those used in this survey are widely used for college admission, and are increasingly used for job placement. The facts of life in modern society are that the intellectual skills, which involve reading, writing, calculation, analysis of information, are becoming basic requirements for independence, for productive work, for political participation, for wise consumption. Such intellectual skills were far less important in the simpler rural society from which ours has grown.... Large portions of our current problems in education of the disadvantaged stem from this rural background and from the sharp transition our society has undergone.

> Thus, while such test results are not the only thing educators mean when they speak of the outcomes of schooling, they are a large and important part of it. Such tests are not in any sense "culturally fair"; in fact, their very design is to determine the degree to which a child has assimilated a culture appropriate to modern life in the United States. Cultural disadvantage should show up most markedly in tests of this sort, because they are designed to measure performance in a highly technical and sophisticated culture.[iv]

Coleman's description of culturally charged exams applies not only to the tests he gave, but also to today's reading comprehension tests.[1] From the ACT to the SAT, from PARCC to Smarter Balanced, all valid and reliable reading comprehension tests examine the extent to which students have mastered a body of knowledge that well-educated adults in the U.S. take for granted (e.g., in national news and debates).[v]

To be blunt, Coleman simply told us what we already knew: In 1966, almost all Americans in power were highly educated white people. Others who wanted to join them or communicate with them (including the leaders' own children and "other people's children"[vi]) had to learn what those in power knew. Achievement tests—as Coleman stated forthrightly—assessed the extent to which students had accumulated that dominant-culture knowledge.

This is the part where I am supposed to damn the tests as culturally biased. Others have done so, and over the past few decades our achievement tests, and especially reading comprehension tests, have rightly been purged of extreme references such as to yachting terminology.[vii] Along the way, however, we have lost sight of an inevitable fact of achievement tests: They are not, as Coleman said, "culturally fair." They never will be.[2]

To crib Coleman's words, large portions of our current problems in education of the disadvantaged stem from our current test developers and policymakers not being forthright about the nature and content of the tests we currently give—and about the nature of reading comprehension. Even if it were possible to purge humankind of all biases, communication would still depend upon a shared base of vocabulary and knowledge. Whether in rap lyrics or inaugural addresses, so much of

[1] There is one important way in which Coleman is not accurate: his perception of "cultural disadvantage." Cultural differences are a source of strength, beauty, and enjoyment for all of us, so long as all of us develop enough shared knowledge to communicate effectively. Students who don't learn enough to engage in national issues, or who can't easily comprehend a national newspaper, are at a disadvantage. But that does not mean that their home culture is deficient; it means that they need further education. Ideally, schools would help children embrace both their home culture and their national culture. As explained later in this commentary, that's a powerful tool for progress nationally.

[2] Psychometricians tend to discuss this as a matter of "content validity" (see Ford, 2004, in endnote 7). Since a test may ask about content that a student has not had an opportunity to learn, a low score does not necessarily indicate a lack of ability. A test may accurately indicate students' current knowledge and may accurately predict future scores *if there is no substantial change in the students' opportunity to learn*. But that same test may not produce an accurate indication of how student performance might increase in a different setting, such as a school with a more rigorous curriculum.

knowledge and vocabulary is taken for granted rather than explained or defined. If you have the relevant background knowledge and vocabulary, you'll comprehend with ease. If you don't, you won't.

This body of shared knowledge on which communication depends is one of the defining features of all peoples and all cultures. Precisely what is taken for granted varies from one culture to the next, but each culture has some base of shared knowledge that is passed from elders to youth, even as it changes within and across generations. The less of that shared knowledge you have, the more limited your communication ability—and thus opportunity—will be.

For those of us who chose careers in education to equalize opportunity, this cultural aspect of how language works should give us pause. As citizens, we may strive to challenge and transform the dominant culture. As educators, however, we must not let that call interfere with teaching every student the knowledge she needs to communicate effectively with those currently in power.

Take Martin Luther King, Jr., for example. He drew his persuasive power from American's widely shared ideals, grounded in widely read texts: our nation's founding documents and the Bible. King knew that in order to be understood by people whose life experiences differed from his, he would have to locate his call for equality in terms they already cherished.

This is the key that leaders and educators miss when they attempt to teach reading comprehension as a content-indifferent set of skills and strategies, placing students' choice of texts above specific content they must master. A subset of those leaders and educators eschew teaching the dominant culture out of fear that doing so amounts to indoctrination. That fear is misguided. One cannot change that which one does not know. Refusing to teach our students the shared knowledge that underwrites cultural and political power withholds from them the most important tool for progress. It also prevents them from becoming strong readers and scoring well on reading comprehension tests.

A second culture—like a second language—need not be subtractive. American children can embrace both their home cultures and also our shared national culture—indeed, they must, if they are to thrive as individuals and citizens. And our schools must help them.

Other countries have boosted academic achievement and narrowed persistent achievement gaps in part by recognizing the role of shared knowledge. An essential feature of their educational systems is thus a content-specific, grade-by-grade curriculum (be it national- or state-level) and curriculum-based tests.[viii] These nations don't waste time on the farce of standards- and skills-based testing, which often assesses content that many students have not been taught and thus tends to be unfair to students without college-educated parents. They admit that there are certain concepts, discoveries, words, facts, people, places, and phrases that all children ought to learn in order to become strong readers, to discover their passions, and to lay a foundation for future learning. The cumulative nature

of the curriculum allows students to develop deep knowledge, which, in turn, enables critical thinking and problem solving.[ix]

A content-specific curriculum constitutes a grand, essential, and inexpensive step toward equalizing educational opportunity, but it is a step that we have not taken. As a result, learning experiences are dramatically different family to family, district to district, and even classroom to classroom.[x] Failing to impart a content-specific curriculum might not be the equivalent of ignoring a proven cure for cancer, but it feels pretty close. Coleman would have agreed.

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Endnotes

[i] See, for example, Daniel T. Willingham, "How Knowledge Helps," *American Educator*, Spring 2006, available at www.aft.org/periodical/american-educator/spring-2006/how-knowledge-helps.
[ii] Nonie K. Lesaux, "Reading and Reading Instruction for Children from Low-Income and Non-English-Speaking Households," *The Future of Children*, Vol. 22(2), Fall 2012, p. 76, available at www.futureofchildren.org/futureofchildren/publications/docs/22_02_05.pdf.
[iii] Nell K. Duke and Meghan K. Block, "Improving Reading in the Primary Grades," *The Future of Children*, Vol. 22(2), Fall 2012, p. 66, available at futureofchildren.org/futureofchildren/publications/docs/22_02_04.pdf.
[iv] James S. Coleman and others, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, Washington, DC: National Center for Educational Statistics, 1966, p. 281, available at files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED012275.pdf.
[v] E. D. Hirsch and Robert Pondiscio, "There's No Such Thing as a Reading Test," The American Prospect, June 13, 2010, available at prospect.org/article/theres-no-such-thing-reading-test.
[vi] Lisa Delpit, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*, New York: New Press, 1995.
[vii] See, for example, Donna Y. Ford, *Intelligence Testing and Cultural Diversity: Concerns, Cautions, and Considerations*, Washington, DC: The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, 2004, available at http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED505479.pdf; Robert L. Linn, Michael V. Levine, C. Nicholas Hastings, and James L. Wardrop, "Item Bias in a Test of Reading Comprehension," *Applied Psychological Measurement*, April 1981, Vol. 5(2), available at apm.sagepub.com/content/5/2/159.abstract; and Ronnie Reese, "Minority Testing Bias Persists," *The Huffington Post*, February 21, 2013, available at www.huffingtonpost.com/ronnie-reese/test-bias-minorities_b_2734149.html.
[viii] See, for example, Marc Tucker (Ed.), *Surpassing Shanghai: An Agenda for American Education Built on the World's Leading Systems*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2011.
[ix] Daniel T. Willingham, "Critical Thinking: Why Is It So Hard to Teach?" *American Educator*, Summer 2007, available at http://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/periodicals/Crit_Thinking.pdf.
[x] William H. Schmidt, Leland S. Cogan, and Curtis C. McKnight, "Equality of Educational Opportunity," *American Educator*, Winter 2010-2011, available at http://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/periodicals/Schmidt_1.pdf.